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Japanese Nuclear Experts Robbed on Soviet Train

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MOSCOW, Feb. 20 — Four Japanese nuclear experts traveling from Moscow to Leningrad aboard the overnight express last month were knocked out by gas sprayed under their compartment door and robbed. Some diplomats say the bizarre incident may have overtones of industrial espionage.

The victims — businessmen specializing in the industrial uses of nuclear power — reported losing their passports and visas together with travelers' checks and currency in the robbery.

But the unusual twists in the story have raised doubts among some Japa-

nese here as to whether the incident was a simple robbery, as the Soviet police contend, or industrial espionage.

The Japanese Embassy says officially that it accepts the Soviet account. The police told the embassy that two Soviet Georgians who were said to have used the same procedure to rob others on the train had been seized when they attempted to leave the train at an intermediate stop for which they were not ticketed.

However, other Japanese who are familiar with the case say the embassy's formal position masks a strong degree of skepticism. Among other things, they cited the "extraordinary police work," as one source put it, that made it possible to track down and return four passports less than 24 hours after they supposedly had been tossed off a fast-moving train in the middle of the night.

The four Japanese who were robbed were members of an eight-man delegation that had attended a nuclear energy symposium outside Moscow as guests of the Soviet Government's Committee on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy.

The men did not report any interference with technical papers, but a Japanese source said this did not necessarily mean that the men were not carrying sensitive papers or that the papers had not been photographed or tampered with.

The source said that, if the men had been carrying such papers, they might not have wanted to reveal it. Others projecting this line of speculation noted that much nuclear energy development in Japan has been conducted under license from American manufacturers, which might be an additional reason for not disclosing that technical data had been compromised.

Another theory advanced by the Japanese sources was that Soviet security agents had penetrated the compartment under the cover of the gas in the hope of finding technical papers, but had found none.

The symposium was part of a regular

series of exchanges on the peaceful applications of nuclear energy that the Soviet Union has with Japan and other Western countries. Similar contacts with the United States have been abrogated in the wake of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan two years ago and the military crackdown in Poland last December.

The four Japanese included representatives of Hitachi, which builds nuclear generating units, and of the Tohoku Electrical Company, which operates nuclear plants. The delegation also included a representative of Mitsubishi, which also makes nuclear generating units, but it was not clear whether he was in the compartment that was robbed or a similar four-man compartment that was not disturbed. The Japanese Embassy declined to name any of the men.

The incident occurred aboard the Red Arrow, a crack train. On the night of Jan. 25-27, the train was about a third of the way along the 400-mile route from Moscow to Leningrad when one of the four men in the robbed compartment awoke to go to the toilet. He told embassy officials later that he felt for his wallet in his suit jacket as he returned to his bunk, found it missing and raised the alarm at about 3 A.M.

On arriving in Leningrad, the Japanese delegation was informed that the two Georgians had been arrested. The police said they had also gassed the conductor in the Japanese travelers' car as well as a group of Russians traveling in another car. The police declined to identify the gas that purportedly was used in the incident or to identify the men said to have been arrested.

Another curious aspect of the case was the condition of the returned passports, according to Japanese who saw the documents. One was in pristine shape, but the others were returned splattered with mud and scored across the middle as though partly run over by a train.